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AUTHOR Wiener, Dirk A.
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ABSTRACT

This paper on special education in the early 20th century examines: the status of special education before World War I; changes in social philosophy that arose as a result of the war and their impact on education; the care and treatment of individuals traumatized by World War I; and the results of the war in improved theory and expanded knowledge of physical, psychological, and social problems. The paper determines that, despite changing attitudes and improved methods for training the handicapped, the lot of handicapped children did not significantly improve in the years immediately following World War I. The number of children in special education classes grew steadily throughout the 1920s, but not every handicapped child had the opportunity to attend public school, especially the more severely handicapped and those in rural areas of the United States. The paper concludes that it is likely that the battle for the rights of handicapped children would have been more difficult if World War I had not changed social opinions and demonstrated that the disabled could be productive. (Includes 21 references) (JDD)

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The Effects of World War I on Special Education in the United States

Dirk A. Wiener
Purdue University

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"The Effects of World War I on Special Education in the United States."

Most Americans are aware of the major historical results and consequences of "The War to End All Wars". High school students are taught about the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the formation of the League of Nations and the war reparations and sanctions imposed on Germany which, at least in part, influenced the rise of Naziism and Adolf Hitler who in turn brought the world back into global conflict. This paper will examine a much less historically significant consequence of World War I: change in theory and practice in the field of special education. Specifically, this paper will examine the status of special education before World War I, determine what changes in social philosophy arose as a result of the war which impacted education, examine the care and treatment of individuals traumatized by World War I and investigate the results of this war in both improved theory and expanded knowledge of physical, psychological and social problems.

The Status of Special Education Before World War I

Prior to World War I, there were few provisions for the handicapped in American schools. This phenomenon can be explained by examining public attitudes toward the handicapped at the turn of the century.

Previous decades (1850 - 1890) had been kinder to the handicapped, especially the mentally retarded in the hope that through education and training their condition could actually be cured. Small, well-kept institutions sprang up across the United States. Initial enthusiasm for cure resulted in these institutions filling up as a result of high referral rates. When cure was not forthcoming, individuals were not placed back in their communities and the quality of care deteriorated.

The initial enthusiasm for cure gave way to a more pessimistic perception that the handicapped were forever to be a burden on society (Maloney & Ward, 1979). Even though early treatments for the disabled and mentally retarded were not especially effective, it was motivated by humane concerns. This changes around the beginning of this century.

In 1901 Sir Francis Galton published "Possible Improvement in The Human Breed". He professed the idea that "systematic efforts should be undertaken to improve the human breed by checking the birth rate of the unfit and furthering the productivity of the fit" (David, 1959). Galton is credited with founding the eugenics movement which re-discovered Mendelian principles of heredity, including the transmission of mental retardation. The eugenics movement resulted in a great many states passing sterilization laws to eliminate the "unfit" with Indiana pioneering the way in 1907. In an eighteen year period these laws provided for 6,244 sterilizations of the mentally ill, mentally retarded and criminals (Davis, 1976).

It was also during this period that a well-meaning Henry H. Goddard of the Training School at Vineland, New Jersey published his famous geneological tracing of the Kallikak Family. This study "proved" that mental retardation, criminality, pauperism and prostitution were hereditary. He advocated a total segregation from society for these persons (MacMillan, 1977).

In light of these social phenomena, educational opportunities for the handicapped, or indeed, even different persons,decreased. a growing number of persons were being housed in ever-larger institutions. A 1916 Bureau of Census Report indicated a total of 394,991 "inmates, patients or pupils" housed in various institutions for the "feeble-minded, insane, criminalistic, epileptic, inebriate, tubercular, blind, deaf, deformed and dependent". Due to the wide variety of handicapping conditions in the institutions of the day, a wide variety of education and training opportunities awaited the inhabitants. Maloney and Ward (1979) reported the widespread practice of using residents to run the institution's services purely for the sake of "expediency

and convenience." Hewitt & Ross (1977) report that at the Rome State School in New York the residents lived "happier, more independent and productive lives" when returned to society after a period of institutionalization and training."

Educational opportunities in the public schools for the handicapped were even less prevalent. Several sources (MacMillan, 1977; Farber, 1968; Baker, 1968; Dunn, 1961) report the first public school special education class was begun in Providence, Rhode Island in 1896. This class, ostensibly for "backward" children, served what we now call the mildly mentally handicapped. The growth of public school classrooms for the handicapped during the first decade and a half of this century was steady but not spectacular (Bureau of Education, 1921). It did not conform with the rise in numbers of labeled handicapped persons as a result of the intelligence testing movement, examined later in this paper. Statistics for this period are no doubt unreliable, but do show this trend. The first statistics for public school special education classes begin surfacing in 1914 with 54 school districts, mostly large cities, serving mentally handicapped pupils (Phillips, 1924).

CHANGES IN SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY AS A RESULT OF THE WAR

All wars bring about change. This particular war gave rise to the veterans movement and a new concept regarding those who served in the Armed Forces. With the War Risk Insurance Act of 1917 the U. S. Congress granted the following benefits to U.S. servicemen: 1) compensation for injuries received in military service 2) compensation for support of dependents 3) voluntary insurance 4) medical, surgical and hospital treatment and 5) vocational rehabilitation for those permanently disabled in the service (U.S. Veterans Administration, 1922). The rationale for these benefits is due to the belief that those who serve risk much more than the general population. Veterans benefits are a way of addressing the "inequities inherent in wartime

circumstances" (Taussig, 1974). In essence, World War I veterans received preferential treatment upon their return from Europe as well as being acclaimed heroes.

World War I gave rise to several veterans organizations, most notably for purposes of this paper, the Disabled American Veterans (D.A.V.). Soldiers had been disabled in prior wars, however, the D.A.V. was the first attempt at organization for the sole purpose of promoting the welfare of those injured during military service. The D.A.V. was aggressive in pursuit of legislation and other benefits for its membership. The D.A.V. was especially effective in promoting vocational rehabilitation programs (Minott, 1962). This is likely the first example of a movement which contends that handicapped persons have rights. Other organizations benefiting the handicapped exist at this period in time (The American Association on Mental Defeciency, for example) but their purposes are different.

Disabled World War I veterans helped change the way Americans thought about handicapping conditions. The war modified one important assumption. The previous thought was that the handicapped could not be helped or that, somehow, it was their fault they were socially deficient. However, when disabled soldiers returned from Europe by the thousands, these persons were regarded as acceptable- damaged, wounded, but acceptable.

Cruickshank (1967) expressed this sentiment and believes it was eventually broadened to include all types of handicaps:

> Before their service experience these men had been citizens of their communities... Each in his own way had served his community and been accepted by it. War came. These men were injured. They later returned to their homes as disabled persons... Even though they were injured, crippled and hurt, their friend continued to see them in the perspective of normalcy and in the light of their

> earlier associations... This has meant that physical disability is accepted in a much more favorable light. Joe was a good guy before he went to war. He was injured. Joe is still a good guy, although now disabled, because that's the only way anyone ever knew Joe- as a good guy. This healthy attitude has been unconsciously extended to physically handicapped children as well as to disabled veterans. Gradually it has come to be applied to all types of exceptionality, mental as well as physical. (pp.15-16)

Indeed, educational literature at this period begins to reflect some of these attitudes. Phillips (1924) states there is "a growing interest on the part of cities, states and private organizations in making provisions for... mentally retarded or defective children." Solenberger (1918) calls for public schools to begin in earnest the education of crippled children. Hood (1918) lists approximately 150 pieces of legislation relating to the education of the handicapped passed by the states impacting education of the deaf, blind, crippled, mentally retarded and delinquent which mandate, among other things, compulsory attendance, establisment of public school classes for exceptionalities, the increase of funds for state schools for the deaf and blind and establishment of statewide juvenile justice systems. Also, in discussing the effects of World War I on education the U.S. Bureau of Education (1919) calls for justice to the weak:

> If we were impelled to oppose the enroachment of the strong upon the weak in international affairs, it naturally follow(s) that the strong owe a duty to the weak within our own borders. (p.124)

Improved Theory and Knowledge Through Treatment of Disabled Soldiers

The total number of U. S. soldiers wounded in World War I has been set at 208,526. Of those 40,631 were permanently disabled (U.S. Veterans Administration, 1922). The rehabilitation of wounded soldiers in one form or another has been known throughout history. Treatment of war wounds is mentioned in the earliest Hindu literature. The old Ionian word for physician, used by Homer, originally meant "extractor of arrows." Ancient Roman armies had systems for the care and evacuation of the wounded (United Nations, 1971).

A new concept in the rehabilitation of wounded soldiers was developed after World War I. Emphasis was placed on training the disabled for productive lives through work. Thus was born the term vocational rehabilitation. Every service man who suffered from a disability was entitled to re-training in a specific trade or profession at government expenses.

In order to meet this mandate, professionals in various fields took this opportunity and made some great technical advancements. Prosthetic devices for amputees became more sophisticated. Crude by today's standards, this period saw the first use of adjustable crutches, movable artificial joints and battery-powered prehensile devices (Amar, 1919). A relatively new invention, the motion picture camera, was employed in the study of the movement patterns of the crippled. This technique concentrated on re-educating the disabled by studying their movements in comparison with normal movements (Gilbreth & Gilbreth, 1920).

A large number of soldiers were incapacitated by the war who received no physical wounds. The "shellshocked" veteran provided the emerging field of psychotherapy with numerous cases of severe emotional trauma for a hopeful return to society.[1]

Physical therapy also underwent radical change. Hospital internment, previously confined to routine custodial care, was now seen as the opportunity to begin the re-education process. Refined techniques in the use of heat, light, water, electricity, massage and theraputic exercise allowed soldiers to spend less time in hospitals and begin vocational re-training earlier. Until the war these types of therapies were practiced by a handful of enthusiasts in the various professions or were exploited by untrained charlatans under the guise of medical practice. Due to the number of wounded and disabled soldiers in hospitals and sanatoriums, especially along the East Coast of the United States, these more effective techniques were placed in the hands of a greater number of professionals (McKenzie, 1918). Vocational rehabilitation was successful in meeting its objective. By the middle of 1922 over 8,700 soldiers had completed their rehabilitation and had secured emplyment in over 300 various occupation (U.S. Veterans Administration, 1922).

We have seen earlier how the attitudes toward disabled soldiers helped bring about more favorable public sentiment toward handicapped children. It can likewise be concluded that handicapped children also benefited from some of the theraputic advancements which came out of World War I

One other consequence of World War I must be detailed when discussing its effect on the handicapped. A massive number of recruited and volunteer soldiers were administered intelligence tests before and during the war. This was the first large scale use of these instruments. Nearly half of those tested were found to have mental ages of less than thirteen years and would have been classified as mentally deficent by the standards of the era. This was startling in light of the fact that estimates of the mentally retarded in the general population had always been placed at approximately 2%. When proportioned to the general population, the Army results would have classified nearly 50 million persons in the United States as mentally deficient. This prompted "many misgivings as to the future

of America as a democracy" (Davis, 1976). Fortunately, little hysteria resulted from these findings. The attitude which prevailed stated that the tests and their interpretation had been flawed, not that America was a moronic nation. As a result of the knowledge gained through this use of intelligence tests, more effective instruments followed. Succeeding versions provided better diagnostic tools for the selection of educable mentally handicapped pupils and encouraged the expansion of appropriate educational programs (Cruickshank, 1967).

Conclusions

Despite changing attitudes and improved methods for training the handicapped, the lot of handicapped children did not significantly improve after World War I. In fact, it was not until after World War II and the founding of parent groups, most notably the National Association for Retarded Children, that handicapped children began receiving comprehensive special education services. The number of children in special education classes did grow steadily throughout the 1920's, but certainly not every handicapped child had the opportunity to attend public school, especially the more severely handicapped and those unfortunate enough to reside in the more rural areas of the United States.

Maloney and Ward (1979) cite some factors which inhibited growth and change in public policy and opinion toward the handicapped. The most obvious of events were the Great Depression of the 1930's and the onset of World War II. America had other priorities in the 30's and 40's which consumed its attention, policy, legislation and, most importantly, its treasury. There was little to no expansion of special education programs in these two decades. Secondly, the nature/nurture debates, which had their roots in the geneological studies discussed earlier, overshadowed all other issues with relation to the handicapped. What these discussions obscured was any concentration on actually improving services to the handicapped. Finally, while disabled

soldiers were able to turn some sentiment and compassion toward handicapped children. This did not reverse the trend toward institutionalization. Indeed, after the war the institution was still a viable alternative for many families. When the war no longer consumed great economic resources, these facilities began to be built again.

Handicapped children were thought of in a kinder light after World War I even though services to them were not greatly effected in the succeeding three decades. Once national policies toward handicapped children began surfacing in the 1950's efforts in their behalf snowballed and culminated in the passage of Public Law 94-142 (The Education of All Handicapped Children Act) in 1975. Would it have taken an additional 30 years for this landmark legislation to pass if the United States had not gone through the trials which World War I presented? That proposition is doubtful. Would the battle for the rights of these children had been more difficult if World War I had not changed a few opinions and demonstrated that the disabled could be productive? That proposition is likely.

Footnotes

[1]Historian John Toland in his biography of Adolph Hitler discusses the Nazi Dictator's treatment for mustard gas poison in World War I. The poisoning resulted in blindness from which Hitler did not recover. Doctors concluded his blindness and resulting depression were hysterical in nature. The seeds of Hitler's megalomania are planted through psychoanalysis and hypnotic suggestion. He recovers immediately and is convinced of his own greatness and destiny, thus setting back the cause of the handicapped through the use of techniques which helped many.

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